

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**Tuesday, February 15, 2022**

**Video Conference**

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**VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Chris Palmer (Chair)

Danielle Barkhouse

Larry Harrison

Tom Taggart

Nolan Young

Hon. Ben Jessome

Ali Duale

Suzy Hansen

Lisa Lachance

[Danielle Barkhouse was replaced by John White.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

**WITNESS**

Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation

Peter Stoffer, Board Member  
Sandra Goodwin, Executive Director



**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2022**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**2:00 P.M.**

**CHAIR**  
Chris Palmer

**VICE CHAIR**  
Danielle Barkhouse

**THE CHAIR:** Good afternoon, committee. I have two o'clock on my phone, so I'd like to call our meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, and my name is Chris Palmer. I am the member for Kings West and the Chair of this committee.

All participants present today should keep their video on throughout the meeting, as per our normal processes over the last couple months, with their microphones on mute unless I recognize them to speak. Remember to turn on your own microphone before speaking, and then put it back on mute afterward.

When we get to the question-and-answer period, indicate your wish to speak by raising your hand physically or on our Zoom buttons. I appreciate your patience as we go through this process. On this system, looking at the screen, I will do my best to make sure I have everybody in order as I see the hands come up.

Please do not leave your seat during the meeting, like I said. If you do leave, leave your camera on with your audio muted - that way we know we have a quorum and we know whether you're present if a vote is called for. If you have another device with you - like a phone - we ask that you please put it on silent. If I need to confer privately with the clerk or counsel, or if members wish to confer before a vote, I may call a brief recess.

If any members have technical problems, please phone or text the clerk. I believe we all have that contact information provided for us.

At this point, I would like to ask all the committee members to introduce themselves - following the membership list - beginning with MLA White.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For Hansard, I acknowledge the presence of Chief Legislative Council Gordon Hebb, and Legislative Committee Clerk Judy Kavanagh, who is sitting in for our acting committee clerk, Kim Leadley. Welcome, Judy and Gordon.

We'll move on to our agenda this afternoon and our topic, the services provided by the Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation. We're very pleased to have our witnesses with us today who will be speaking on that. I'd like to welcome Peter Stoffer, who is a board member with the Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation; and Sandra Goodwin, Executive Director with the Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation. We look forward to the information we're going to get from you folks today, and the great conversation I'm sure we'll have.

Welcome to you both. At this point, we'd like to offer you an opportunity to have some opening remarks, and I'll leave it to you folks to carry on. Welcome.

PETER STOFFER: Between Sandra and myself, thank you all very much for this opportunity to assist your committee in the work that we do. We'd like to start off by saying, first of all, who we are . . .

SANDRA GOODWIN: Sorry, just one second. Could we have LTV put up our slides, maybe just on half of the screen? Are we able to run our own slides?

JUDY KAVANAGH: I think the people at home are seeing the full slide. We're just seeing it as one block up in the corner of our screens.

SANDRA GOODWIN: Okay, perfect. That's great. We'll continue. Thank you.

PETER STOFFER: We are the Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation. Who we are, exactly: we're a charitable organization established to help Canada's military and RCMP veterans and their families. We investigate and navigate the legal and administrative hurdles that they face while accessing benefits that they deserve, and to reduce the burden of legal fees associated with administrative tribunals and courts. We do this by two things: providing advice and help, and also providing an opportunity to pay their legal bills when eligible.

In March 2007, the SISIP LTD Class Action commenced with Dennis Manuge - by the way, of Nova Scotia - and 7,500 other medically-released disabled veterans had disability income replacement payments that were clawed back from their pension

amounts. Most disabled veterans received little to nothing from SISIP, which they had paid into their entire careers. It was really an insult to our veterans at that time.

In May 2012, the Federal Court ruled that Canada acted illegally in reducing these long-term disability benefits. Our veterans won this historic case through access to justice. I want to give a special kudos to Branch MacMaster and McInnes Cooper and the law firms that participated in this. They started that lawsuit as a pro bono action and they were very successful after five years, receiving this funding for our veterans.

In January 2016, the Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation fund was established with a private donation of over \$1 million by the lawyers who received fees in the settlement. That's how we got started. We help eligible CAF and RCMP veterans attain justice and benefits they deserve in areas that help other veterans.

Most disability-related appeals with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and veterans exhausted all grievances with VAC, their Members of Parliament, the Veterans Ombudsman, et cetera. We covered at that time eligible legal expenses up to \$10,000.

Recently, we have just received from Ottawa, from the firm of Michel Drapeau Law Office a \$1-million cost funding. This money went directly into our accounts. Now, because of that, we're able to assist CAF and RCMP veterans in obtaining disability benefits, paying their legal bills up to \$12,000. As well, as of last October, we offer free advisory and consultation services for all military and RCMP veterans and their families right across the entire country.

We help outline the best plan of action for them to pursue justice, benefits, and other supports, and in many cases, just listening to the veteran and/or their family and the issue they're going through. We try to offer them what we call sober advice in order to assist them in navigating the system they're about to get involved in, or that they're already involved in. These were never needed more than they are now, as many veterans are frustrated by the system that they deal with, in terms of not only the federal level but the provincial and municipal levels as well.

Basically, to take an example, we would assist a veteran in how they contact their member of the provincial Legislature. It may surprise you - or it may not, for those who've been around a long time - that a lot of your constituents will never contact you, because they think you're too busy or they really don't fundamentally know how to contact a provincial representative. They simply don't. They try to navigate the system on their own - in the municipal ones, it's 311 in this regard or other areas - but they really don't know their federal Member of Parliament or provincial Member of the Legislative Assembly, so we assist them in doing that, in many ways. I can give examples of that later on.

We help with the administrative hurdles that they go through, especially for veterans dealing with PTSD or OSI. An awful lot of them do not like 1-800 numbers. They do not like dealing with the mail. They have difficulty dealing with email. What they really

want is the old-fashioned approach of a human voice and a human person being able to assist them in dealing with whatever issues they're going through at the time - more or less, a friendly and helpful voice on the other end of the phone just to be able to talk to them. We do this on a repeated basis. We'll assist someone and maybe be able to conclude their transaction for them, but we always give them our number and email so they can contact us at any time if they want any further assistance in any regard at all.

Our team is made up of really great, qualified people: myself as the Chair; Christine Nault, who is a lawyer is one of our directors; Jessie Driscoll, another lawyer is a director; Peter Driscoll, who was very successful in the McInnes Cooper class action suit with Dennis Manuge, also a lawyer and one of our directors; and Caitlin Green, another lawyer, as well as our director. Finally, of course, Sandra Goodwin, sort of the glue of the whole operation. She's our coordinator and puts it all together for us.

We're very, very pleased to be able to offer this service to our men and women who serve our country because they're the ones who allow us our peace, freedom, and our democracy. Whether you're at a federal, provincial, or municipal level, we all as former representatives and as the current representatives that you are now, owe a great deal of gratitude and thanks to the men and women who serve our country - not just the military and RCMP, but all first responders and, most importantly, their families as well. We ask them to do some terrific things in order to assist us, and some of them get injured in the line of duty. We, as a caring society, have an obligation to assist them in any way we can, and in many ways, it's lending a handout, a calm and rational voice to be able to assist them in the deliverance of services that they're looking for.

I always like to say this to folks. In the 18 years I was a Member of Parliament, and the years after, I have never met a military or RCMP veteran who ever asked the government for a Rolex watch or a trip to Florida. What they've asked for is assistance with their pension benefits, assistance to get to a doctor or a psychiatrist, or to be able to get assistance in their daily lives, help with their families if anything happens in that regard - and do it in a timely fashion where they feel that they're actually getting assistance and relevance from their government at this time.

Unfortunately, the system is set up where there's very long delays in this regard. It's extremely frustrating for the men and women who serve our country to have to go through those delays. I'm sure you're probably fully aware of that. We set up this organization, this charity, in order to assist those men and women who have served us because we asked them to assist us - and all we could do in return is thank them and then offer assistance to them when they come knocking on our door looking for help.

Sandra and I would be honoured to take any questions that any of you may have. We do thank you very much for this opportunity to appear before your committee. I appreciate the committee's work that you've done over the years. I think you do great work. It's very, very important. Even though most veterans' issues are at a federal level,

it's very important that the provinces and territories, as well, play an active role in their lives. I thank all of you for doing that - truly appreciate it.

[2:15 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr. Stoffer and Ms. Goodwin. I look forward to the conversation that we're about to have and would like to enter into the question-and-answer period now.

I'd just like to remind everybody to, if you can, put your hand up on the Zoom windows. If for some reason it's not working for you, just put your hand up and I'll try to keep a running list of questions. That's the procedure for our committee. I'll do my best, as I'm looking around the screen, to make sure I'm getting everybody in the order that I see the hands come up in the interest of trying to give everybody equal time in our questions. I'll ask everybody to keep to one question at a time, and then we'll continue on with the flow of questions as we move forward. I look to wrap up our questioning by around 3:40 p.m.

With that being said, I'd like to start with MLA Hansen. You're first to ask questions.

SUZY HANSEN: My question is for Ms. Goodwin. You worked with a class action team for SISIP. Could you talk a bit about the legacy of that decision, and how things have changed since that win?

SANDRA GOODWIN: Yes, I was with McInnes Cooper during the time of the Manuge SISIP class action, working in a capacity of a public relations communications support to the class action team. In fact, it was such a solid argument and an unprecedented instance where the government was clawing back benefits that the veterans were entitled to, it really became very much of a public relations exercise.

We set up a website called Leave No Vet Behind and this was an area where veterans could go and post their stories and share their stories, and join the class. It's how we managed to communicate with the veterans, create a bit of a movement among the veterans, and then create awareness.

I don't know if it's the first time that a class action was successful because of the combination of a strong argument, a class of over 8,000 veterans and a strong collective story, but it certainly lent to the result being over a billion in award, which I think was the largest of its kind in Canada at the time.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: My question is to Mr. Stoffer. Can you speak about the work that's currently being done to address PTSD and mental health needs of our veterans?

PETER STOFFER: On a federal level?

TOM TAGGART: Yes.

PETER STOFFER: Right now, I do give government credit. If you asked me this question in 1997, the answer would be almost nothing. But that's simply not true right now. There are OSI clinics across the country. The government has taken a much more proactive approach in this regard. Is it enough? The answer is no, and of course, they would always say we could always do more with more.

What happens with post-traumatic stress disorder is - you and I could have an incident and it may affect you immediately, but it may affect me three, four years down the road or even longer. There is no cookie cutter approach to dealing with people who have post-traumatic stress disorder or operational stress injury. Every single situation is completely different. Each one has to be approached on that human, basic individual level.

That's extremely difficult for any plan or government or organization or group to address, because there is no cookie cutter approach to it. Not one Band-Aid fits all. The governments have moved the yardsticks on this nowhere near where I believe they should have, but in fairness to governments at the provincial and federal level, there are simply not enough psychiatrists and psychologists in the country to address those serious issues.

I deal a lot with my friends in the United States in groups like Fisher House, which is attached to each VA building in the United States. They are screaming for qualified people who can deal with military and first responder issues in this regard. They simply don't have enough of them. In Canada, we simply don't have enough either.

What governments should do is put programs in place and assist those young people who are taking those courses in school to become qualified psychiatrists and medical doctors in dealing with military, RCMP and policing, and first responder issues so that they would have the expertise and know-how when these people come forward on how to deal with them effectively.

Right now, governments are doing better, but nowhere near where I believe they should be. In fairness to them, it's not a very easy thing to ask. It doesn't matter who the government is - it's a very difficult thing to get qualified people to help them.

Having said that, if governments moved the benefit system in a much faster and more efficient manner, you could eliminate an awful lot of these problems. A lot of problems are exasperated by the delays involved in getting a hearing or getting your



documents in order, or even getting someone on the phone to talk to you. What normally would take about six months to a year, now takes up to two years or five years.

I just concluded a case that was on the news recently with Dawn Collins of Bedford. That case took 13 years to finally get solved and at the end it was on a compassionate basis why they did the thing, but 13 years. Many veterans I deal with are up to three, four, five, six years in many cases dealing with issues. To be very frank with you, one suggestion I make to the federal government is to allow the frontline people who take the call to base their decision on peer-reviewed medical elements.

If MLA Tom Taggart is a veteran, he goes in with an audiologist report that says his hearing is quite poor or weakened, and it's a high cause probability because of your military or RCMP service. Once the audiologist signs on that, the frontline person should be able to make the decision on your application for benefits and your hearing aids, et cetera, based on that medical evidence. It shouldn't have to go to other levels of people to look at for review. It's this delay that causes an awful lot of the frustration within the military and RCMP communities.

Other than that, when it comes to your original question on post-traumatic stress disorder, governments are getting better, just not near where they should be.

TOM TAGGART: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Next is MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you for being here today. I have a question following up on some of your remarks earlier. You talked about provincial representatives in particular doing a better job of outreach to veterans. I'm wondering if you could speak to that a little bit.

You've been talking about the timing delays. I'm wondering what the impact of COVID-19 has been on people, as well. What are some immediate steps that we can take to really address that?

PETER STOFFER: That's a great question. There's no question that COVID-19 played a role in some of these delays, as some of the staffing levels at DVA across the country - they would have been at home recovering from their illness. Also, the fact that their offices that they had reopened had to close again because of that. No question, a lot of people lost that interaction and that human touch in this regard.

It's not necessarily COVID-19 that caused these delays. These delays have been in place for an incredibly long time. I encourage your committee to look at the Veterans Ombudsman Report going back to when we initiated the Veterans Ombudsman file back in 2006 and 2007 when Colonel Pat Stogran was the first Veterans Ombudsman. He and

others after him all said the exact same thing. It's the way the system is set up for benefit retrieval and benefit opportunities - it is so delayed.

The entire system is set up to catch the less than 2 per cent of people who may be trying to cheat the system, and you've got 98 per cent of them who are just trying to get through this system. It is like a Gordian knot of bureaucracy. This is what's causing an awful lot of the frustration within the military community, regardless of whether they're applying for a hearing aid, they're applying for an opportunity to get into Camp Hill, whether they're applying for back surgery, whether they're applying for a case where they had a sexual assault of some case.

Every single time, it is the delays of getting, first of all, a person to talk to. To get a case manager, for example, is almost impossible. It's not impossible, but it's almost impossible getting a case manager because there's nowhere near enough of them to assist these veterans.

One of the things that I had asked for that we had back in the 1940s and 1950s for returning World War II veterans was a call-back system. Every single military and RCMP veteran, for example, who would leave the service, they would keep their service number, and every six months to a year, they would get a call or an email from the federal government just saying, "How are you doing, Lisa? How's everything going? This is Peter from DVA just wanting to know how's it going? Any situations in your life change at all? No? That's fantastic. If anything does pop up, here's our number. You can call me at any time," et cetera.

If the government had a call-back system, there is a very, very good chance we could have prevented what happened with Lionel Desmond and his family in that serious tragedy. The problem with him and that situation is every single one of us - and I include myself as a volunteer, if I had known about it, we could have done something. But the volunteers dropped the ball, the Province dropped the ball, the municipality dropped the ball, and the federal government dropped the ball. Everybody together collectively is responsible for what happened with Lionel Desmond and his family. It is rare when someone takes the lives of other ones around them. We've had many suicides within the military and RCMP community. I honestly believe an awful lot of this can be prevented if we initiated a call-back system where we had an annual checkup on folks just to see how they're doing.

You don't necessarily have to have benefits from DVA because as you well know, we have almost 650,000 to 700,000 veterans in the country. That's military, RCMP and dependent spouses. DVA has only a client base of around 160,000 to 170,000, so two-thirds of the current community that we're talking about are not being served by the federal government. There are three possible reasons for that: one, they don't know anything about applying for a benefit or they've been out for so long they completely forgot about it; two, they've applied for a benefit and were denied, so they just gave up and

said forget about it; or three, they're so frustrated with the system they don't even want to bother trying.

These are the types of things that we need to overcome in order to alleviate an awful lot of problems. If we streamline the system, put trust and faith back in the system and give the benefit of the doubt - and I say that to my Progressive Conservative and NDP colleagues here - we need to apply it much more liberally in many ways in order to get them the benefits they need in a timely manner. If we did that, we can go a long way in alleviating an awful lot of problems that are in the system now. By the way, every Veterans Ombudsman has said the exact same thing I've just told you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. Just to give you an update, as I'm going around the screen here - some can't do the hand on the Zoom window, so I'm trying to see hands go up as well. What I see in the list coming up is MLA Young, MLA Harrison, MLA Hansen, MLA Jessome and then MLA White - that's the order that I have coming up. MLA Young, you would be next.

NOLAN YOUNG: I think my question would be directed to Mr. Stoffer. Would you be able to tell me of - I won't say the greatest, but a really great accomplishment that we feel has benefited a veteran in Nova Scotia? It can be something small that meant a lot. It doesn't mean financial - just any big accomplishment that has benefited a veteran in Nova Scotia.

PETER STOFFER: I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear the question properly.

NOLAN YOUNG: Could you tell me the greatest accomplishment that you feel has benefited a veteran in Nova Scotia? Maybe it's something small, but it meant a lot to that person and it's not financially.

PETER STOFFER: I would say collectively the allowance of Camp Hill Hospital to be able to allow modern day veterans access to that facility. For years, we fought - for example, the well-known case of Petter Blindheim, a Norwegian veteran, an Allied veteran who was initially denied entry to Camp Hill. As we told people over and over again, Camp Hill is owned and operated by the Nova Scotia Health Authority. It is part of the provincial government's responsibility to run, administer and operate Camp Hill. It's not a federal hospital. What it is, as you all well know - and many people in the country don't realize this - we have no veterans hospitals in the country. We have hospitals where veterans are placed and one of them, of course, is Camp Hill.

Years ago, modern day veterans after Korea were not allowed to go into Camp Hill but with the efforts of Petter Blindheim - and I give the former Premier, Mr. Stephen McNeil and others - and I see my friend Ben Jessome was there who was helpful in this regard and others who were very helpful in putting the pressure on. It wasn't necessarily educating provincial and federal governments but working with them to ensure that as our World War II veterans are leaving us because of the passage of time - and we have fewer

than 11,000 of them in the country now - those beds were to be opened up for modern day veterans who are eligible to get the long-term quality care that they deserve.

[2:30 p.m.]

I have to say, sir, that was one of the highlights that happened in this province. That gave an awful lot of assistance to veterans and their families to know that their loved ones who served many years - although maybe not in a conflict zone, but they did serve their country - to have the right and the dignity to get the quality of care that they need, especially near the end of their natural lives. That, sir, was the great thing that Nova Scotia did.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you, folks, for the work you do. It's extremely important. I'm wondering if you've encountered situations where services or claims are denied to someone because they don't fall within the federal government's definition of a veteran. How do you handle those cases if they do arise?

PETER STOFFER: If I'm correct, you're asking the definition of a veteran? Is that correct?

LARRY HARRISON: Yes.

PETER STOFFER: Well, as you know, the definition of a veteran was changed officially in 2000. At that time, the Veterans Affairs Minister, the late Ron Duhamel, changed the definition of what a veteran actually is. Many people didn't consider RCMP members veterans, or even did they consider themselves veterans. However, as we all know, when an RCMP member leaves the service, their benefit packages and all that are administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. That's why we always encourage people to say "military and RCMP veterans" in this regard.

But no, I have not personally come across individuals in that regard. Over the years, I've had someone say that they served a year back in 1949, but there's no record or proof of it. I could never find any of that in this regard.

I've had many, many people denied benefits. What happens sometimes is that a person who served in the 1960s for three or five years, for example, is sitting at the Legion or somewhere and someone says, I got a benefit for my hearing aid just recently - and they served the same time that they did. They go, well, I should apply. Of course, they don't have any of their medical records with them. They don't have anything of this nature. They just call up and say, I'm a veteran and I need to get hearing aids.

Well, it's not that easy, unfortunately. It's quite a process in that regard. Some of them are quite frustrated by that, because they see their friend getting this benefit, but they themselves don't.

The other one, of course, is they have what is called a five-fifths chart, if you're applying for a knee injury or something of that nature. It's one-fifth, two-fifths, three-fifths, four-fifths, or five-fifths of the benefit. So they may award you two-fifths of an award, but then at the bottom of the paragraph it says you can appeal this, which is another year and a half or two-year appeal, so you go through that whole process again. That can be quite frustrating as well. The short answer to your question is, no, I have not, in many ways.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you assess funding requests in terms of whether or not they have the potential to set the precedent for the wider veteran community. What are the legal costs that people are bearing, on average, for any type of situation that they may be in, based on legalities?

PETER STOFFER: The first thing we do - and Sandra is very good at this - is we basically tell folks that we don't assist in terms of family law or criminal proceedings or anything of that nature. We are there strictly to say that if Suzy Hansen has applied for a benefit and went through all the processes - the appeals, the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board - and if you get the letter at the end that says, sorry Suzy, this is not going to happen, we're not going to give you the award unless you provide us with new up-to-date medical information, or your only other option is the Federal Court.

When you get that letter, you would then contact a lawyer. That lawyer would then contact Sandra at the VLAF. Sandra then gets all the information and gives it to the board. We, the board, will look at it - and I look at it on the political level. Did Suzy exhaust all her political opportunities to get this issue dealt with? For example, have you contacted your Member of Parliament? Have you contacted the Ombudsman? Have you asked for a ministerial inquiry into your file? Is there any way we can avoid the courts by exhausting all of your political opportunities?

If that has been done, then the lawyers look at it and ask, is there a legal precedent here? Is this a case that can be merited? Is it worthy of going forward? In many ways, and this is very important to remember: a Federal Court judge cannot overturn a Veterans Review and Appeal Board decision. They can only order the VRAB to review that decision.

I find that very frustrating, by the way: a Federal Court saying, you can't abide by my decision, you can only review that decision. What we find in our research is that in many cases, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board will award the decision after getting the notification, or as they call it, judicial clarification, from the judge in this regard. That's how we look at it.

Not every single veteran who has come to us in terms of their lawyer has been financially assisted, because they don't meet the criteria. Our charitable status and our guidelines indicate specifically what we can and cannot do. Some veterans are frustrated because they're in a divorce situation and they see the legal assistance and they go, I will just get money from them. That's not specifically how it's set up. It's set up for when you've exhausted all your appeals and you need to go to the Federal Court. That's when we can kick in. When the board looks at it and we offer a decision - yes or no - and if we say yes to it, we'll fund it up to \$12,000. So far, we've done over \$200,000 in cases assisting veterans across the country since we've set up this fund.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Ms. Goodwin and Mr. Stoffer, thanks so much for your time and energy and willingness to come chat with us this afternoon. Peter, it's always good to see you. Glad to see that someone with your background and long expertise is a part of the organization. You've certainly been a cherished and willing veterans' advocate without needing to say so. Thank you for your continued effort on behalf of our veterans.

I'm wondering if you could quickly speak to the breakdown between your military servicemen and -women that you see and those who fall into other professions - like the RCMP, for example.

PETER STOFFER: RCMP and military veteran issues are, when they're applying for benefits, almost the same in terms of their application. One of the big concerns, of course, is the Veterans Independence Program. The RCMP are not permitted that benefit at all, which is rather shameful in many ways. We were that close years ago to getting it for them, but we just weren't successful in getting the legislation passed.

The Veterans Independence Program, very briefly, is a program that allows for groundskeeping and housekeeping services to men and women of the military who are eligible in order to stay in their own places of abode much longer. What happens is those who are eligible, receive a cheque at the beginning of the year for six months. Then that person goes out and hires someone to do groundskeeping or housekeeping services in this regard. Then they get a second one again in the Fall that year. It's a great program and it allows people to stay in their own homes longer.

RCMP do not fall under that at all and that is most unfortunate. In most benefit packages, RCMP and military people are treated almost exactly the same when it comes to various benefits. Regardless of whether the person injured their back falling in a stairwell on a ship or injuring their back in a vehicle accident - like an RCMP member, for example - the benefits that they apply for would be roughly the same depending on the extent of that injury. They're treated more or less the same when it comes to DVA - in the delays, as well as, the denials, and the acceptance.

SANDRA GOODWIN: It's worth noting also that there was a companion case to the SISIP clawback case that served a class of retired RCMP veterans where the same legal argument was put forward and won. That had to do with the same thing.

PETER STOFFER: Exactly. The other thing that was successful, as well, with the Manuge case is the Earnings Loss Benefit. It was also being clawed back at that time and a judge put a stop to that immediately. Eventually the retroactivity on that went to a case - it was a trial case, I believe.

SANDRA GOODWIN: Yes.

PETER STOFFER: That eventually was settled as well. When you think what Dennis Manuge and his legal team were able to do for men and women of the military and the RCMP, it really was far-reaching and most beneficial to many of those folks.

THE CHAIR: MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Sandra and Peter, I'd just like to take a minute to thank you guys for the valuable work you're doing. I truly do mean that. I'm a mental health professional myself and a volunteer with the Nova Scotia Critical Incident Stress Management Team. I work with a lot of veterans, because they seem to like the organization so they turn to the fire departments, which is kind of in line with what they're doing.

After working with them, this question relates to me. My question is, when veterans are released from military services for a medical reason and then develop a disability later on that's related to their military service, is it a common occurrence that they would encounter challenges supporting that disability was linked to their service?

PETER STOFFER: It is. One of the things that I advise all military and RCMP personnel who are serving now is to, before they leave, get access to their entire personal and medical file. Get it all. Review it before you leave and sign off. If there are any discrepancies at all, make sure it's dealt with before you leave. If you had an injury - this is so typical of the men and women who serve. None of them ever want to be known as a sick bay ranger. You're part of the team.

That's what the RCMP and military training does. It takes the individual out of you and puts you into part of a team effort. You have to have everyone's back, or as they say, "I've got your six." So what happens is you lose that sort of individuality and you don't want to become a sick bay ranger. You may be a diver and have twin tanks on your back, and you may, for example, happen to do push-up exercises. You may wrench yourself a bit, but you don't want to complain too bad. This injury keeps going and going and you eventually leave the service. Five or six years later - you may also have had OSI or PTSD - now you want to make a claim for this back, but if it's not in your medical files anyway, it's very, very difficult to get that claim successfully through DVA.

Although DVA has the legislative mandate to look for the benefit of the doubt in order to assist you, in my personal experience, they rarely ever apply that. What they do is look for hard, concrete medical evidence in your medical file to back up what that individual was saying.

There's also another thing, and this is embarrassing to government. A person may have worked in the military for four or five years and then they had a job in construction. Maybe they wrenched their knee during construction. Now they're trying to claim a benefit from DVA, saying their knee was injured during military time, when it was actually injured at their construction job that they're doing now. That is difficult for DVA to ascertain, whether that injury was started in the military and just aggravated by the construction work or not.

That's why it's absolutely critical, even if you get a paper cut, to record that information in your medical file. That is the key to getting benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs, whether you're military or RCMP. Those with PTSD, for example, find it very difficult in understanding that and then dealing with the bureaucracy and technical difficulties that all that ascertains for them. They simply don't have the mental wherewithal to deal with all that, and they want someone to do it for them in many ways. Again, even though I sympathize with many of them in this regard, if you do not have it on your medical file, it's very difficult to ascertain a future benefit down the road.

I also may say, if you're injured in any way, shape, or form, apply for that benefit even while you're in service. There's close to, the last time I checked, 900 current military and RCMP personnel who are still working for the military but they're getting DVA benefits. They had an injury and they're still able to work, but that benefit is being adjudicated and delivered to them while they're still serving. They'll carry that benefit on when they leave the service. So it's very important for them to do it much sooner rather than later.

JOHN WHITE: Chair, may I have a follow-up?

THE CHAIR: A quick follow-up if it's in the same line of questioning.

JOHN WHITE: Peter, that would be the commonality. It sounds like it's going to be to make sure it's documented before you leave military service. Is that what you're saying?

PETER STOFFER: Yes.

JOHN WHITE: Thank you. PTSD would be much different, wouldn't it?

PETER STOFFER: Yes, it is, but again, post-traumatic stress disorder doesn't necessarily occur immediately. You could, for example, serve 25 years in the service and



have a variety of experiences that you dealt with, and five or seven years later, after the military, something triggers it and boom, there you have it. You've been diagnosed now with post-traumatic stress disorder. Now you've got to apply for a benefit from the military to be able to assist you in getting the help that you need. That's quite a challenge.

[2:45 p.m.]

This is one of the things I've been saying for many years to the Department of Veterans Affairs: that people who suffer from mental challenges like PTSD or OSI, their triggers can happen many years later, and you have to play the benefit of the doubt of what their experiences were in the military - and is it possible that those experiences caused their mental anguish and what they're having now? Ninety-nine per cent of the time, the answer is yes, and they should try to get that benefit to them as quickly as possible without having them go through the Gordian knot of bureaucracy and all those appeals.

If a psychologist or psychiatrist states that Chris Palmer has post-traumatic stress disorder, and it is a high probability that this was caused by your military or RCMP service, in all fairness, sir, that is all that should be required in order for you to get the benefit that you need to help you.

THE CHAIR: I will just point out to the committee that we'll allow for a follow-up - quick supplementary question - if the second supplementary question is in line with the first question or needed clarification on the answer. If the second question is on a different line of questioning, we will ask that you hold off until the next round of questioning.

I see the hands around the screen here. For people raising their hands, I have MLA Taggart, MLA Lachance, MLA Duale, MLA Young, and MLA Hansen. That's the order I have coming up next. MLA Taggart, you're next.

TOM TAGGART: Mr. Stoffer, I want to go to you with this question. Johnny asked a little bit of it in his follow-up there. First, stigmatization. How challenging is it to get these alpha kinds of people who have been soldiers - and have really been trained to be tough or whatever - to admit, and is there a stigmatization for doing that? Do you see that? Is that something that's really prevalent?

Is there more you can say or expand a little bit about folks who are stricken with PTSD years after the events? That's really where I was going. This whole mental health part of how challenging - mental health is a huge concern of mine. The more you can expand on that, the better.

PETER STOFFER: Mr. Taggart, that's a very good question. The reality is all of you face this in your own constituencies: getting people to open up and talk about the issues that are affecting them. The unfortunate part is that most of our first responders - those in the military and RCMP - do not like to admit they have a problem. They simply don't. Whether they're working now or somewhere down the road, they simply do not

want to admit that they have a problem. They don't want to appear diminished in any way, shape, or form - not just necessarily to their friends and co-workers, but to their family as well.

Take, for example, myself. If I admit that I have an OSI or PTSD, then I have to look at my children, and I'm not the man I was before in that little macho world that we had. Fortunately, sir - and this is to all of you, and all of you deserve a lot of credit for this. I know when you talk with your constituents and with your colleagues, for example, you see more and more people coming forward and saying, yes, I have a problem. I have an issue. I'd like to have this dealt with. They're asking, who can I talk to, where can I go - and everything else.

It really started for me with Roméo Dallaire when he came forward. His rank is General. Think about a general admitting he's got serious mental issues to deal with concerning what he saw in Rwanda. He and I - just very briefly - were in Vietnam, the memorial wall in Washington one time, and there were 58,000 names on the wall. He told me, "What's wrong with this wall?" I said, "Well, you've got 58,000 people here who have died." He said, "No, that's wrong." Thirty years after the end of the Vietnam War in the United States, 120,000 U.S. service personnel took their own lives. So he said, "How many names should be on that wall?" "A hundred seventy-eight thousand," he said, because they didn't die in Vietnam - they died because of Vietnam.

We have veterans coming back from Afghanistan and other areas of conflict. They didn't die in Afghanistan - they died because of Afghanistan. It's like a firefighter or a police officer. They didn't die in the line of service - they died because of their service and what they witnessed.

We would like - and I'm sure all of you, too - would like to prevent a Lionel Desmond or anyone else from feeling they have no other choice but to take their own life. Fortunately, sir, municipal and provincial governments, school boards, and all other institutions - like Bell Canada, for example - are doing a great job getting people to talk to fully understand what is going on with your particular issue.

One thing that I find equally hard is for women who served in the military or RCMP. It's doubly hard for them to come forward because they don't want to appear weak in any way, shape or form to their male counterparts. I say to them: it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman. It simply doesn't matter. If you have an issue of post-traumatic stress disorder or an OSI, please come forward and tell the appropriate people the second you feel unwell. That's the key to getting better down the road. The sooner we can help you, the better.

It's not just in our line of service, in the military and RCMP. It's in every walk of life. It's including some of you. There are 55 MLAs. I guarantee, two or three of you are probably suffering some form of mental anguish along the road. That's when you need to

come forward and seek the help you have. I have to be honest with you, I'm quite proud of the fact that more and more of our society in Canada seems to be opening up to people who are having these issues.

If you look at, for example, that gymnast from the United States. I forget her name, but she came forward. It got a lot of other named people to come forward and say "I have issues too." They're seeking the help they're getting. Fortunately, sir, it's like yourself: a hug, a cup of coffee, a cup of tea, a brownie, a cookie, just a conversation with these folks can set them on the path to wellness.

TOM TAGGART: Listen, I have to comment. I appreciate everything you're doing there. I've got to say, I just truly wish that people had recognized PTSD long ago. I'm at the age where when I was a child, I remember these men in our community who were suffering and sometimes frowned on. Now we look and understand them a lot better. It's just an awful shame that we didn't recognize it earlier. Thank you very much for what you do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Taggart. MLA Lachance, please.

LISA LACHANCE: Thanks for your comments around the need for mental health awareness and reducing mental health stigma. I'm a huge mental health advocate across sectors. I'm always grateful for conversations about mental health in the Legislature or in our committees.

You were talking about the experience of women veterans. At our last committee meeting, we had Dr. Maya Eichler come and present to us. I assume that you may have connected with her and her work.

I'm just wondering, in the face of the official apology and also the recognition of the need to deal with sexual violence in the military, have you seen specific needs around resolving that - not just for women but also for men and other gender-diverse folks? That was certainly something that Dr. Eichler pointed out. While there's a large proportion of women veterans with this experience, the absolute numbers are actually greater for men who had that experience. I'm just wondering how you're seeing this served better - more conversation about sexual misconduct in the military in your own work.

PETER STOFFER: That's a very good question, Lisa. I appreciate that. Just a quick historical preface. If you were in the 1950s, Lisa, and you were in the military and you were pregnant, you would have been removed from your military service. You'd no longer have a job because you had the audacity to become pregnant. You were gone. If you were part of the LGBT community, you were gone. There was no room for that in the Navy. If you were a person of African descent - William Hall received the Victoria Cross in 1859, yet people of his race, for example, were not allowed to serve on ships during World War II.

We have come a long way in many ways, but we are nowhere near where we should be in terms of a co-operative, respectful, balanced military or RCMP or, for that matter, a lot of other first responders, because of the old boys' network. I look at myself when I say that. It's our network. We set up a system where wooden ships and iron men, as they said - women were frowned upon. In fact, having a woman on the ship was considered bad luck. There are still some guys out there who believe that. I don't know why, but they do.

We have a long way to go before then, but there is no question. I just got off the phone the other day with a woman who had a sexual assault back in the 1970s as an RCMP officer. She's just dealing with it now. She's part of the class action where she's getting some funding - but money isn't going to help her. It'll pay the bills, but it won't help her deal with her mental anguish and what she is. She was proud to wear that red serge. She was very proud to wear it. She didn't want to take it off, but she had to, because of what happened to her. Trying to help her - she's trying to understand why it happened to her, and she's not alone in this regard.

All of us, Lisa, have a responsibility to ensure that never happens. If your daughter, for example - if you have a daughter - joined the RCMP today, would she be treated respectfully throughout her entire career? It's bad enough the type of comments she's going to receive as a police officer in the general public, but her workplace, just like your workplace, should be safe, secure, and welcoming. We're nowhere near there yet, Lisa. We have a long way to go in this regard.

It's slowly getting better, but it's going to take a generational change before we can actually see women, people of the LGBTQ community, for example, being more welcomed in the services and having a long, productive, wonderful career. I honestly believe that the military and the RCMP are very good careers to have, but it's not if you're going to be harassed, if you're going to be looked at in a different way and not treated as an equal. Until we get to that stage, recruiting's going to be a problem, and everything else.

We need to do a much better job at the federal level and at the department level, and being a much more welcoming society in these organizations in order to assist those men and women who are thinking of those jobs as a career down the road.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: First of all, thank you for your service, whether being an elected official or an individual citizen. I thank you for your service and your sincere heartfelt. I personally have served this community as a firefighter for 17 years before I put my name in the Legislature. I thank you for that. It's good to know there are people who care, and care sincerely.

My question to you is: How can we as elected officials improve relationships further? How can we open our doors and change how we deal with - because as I saw your

presentation, that was one of the components, that you tried to educate and teach how to deal with politicians and elected officials. But also, I encourage you. My question to you is: What do you have for us to educate on how to deal with and how to improve that relationship? Thank you.

PETER STOFFER: The number one thing I would say is return the phone calls - not your staff, but you personally. If you have voice mail, make it your voice on the voice mail. If you have your staff saying that Suzy Hansen or Ali Duale is not here today, they'll call you back later - if it's not your voice, change it right away.

I always call them the gatekeepers. I had four of them. You probably have yours as well. They do the bulk of your constituency work. I get that, because as individuals, you're very busy. I really get that, but what is very important for your constituents is to know that you personally are taking an interest in their particular issue. It can be as simple as, in your case, a WCB issue. It could be an immigration issue. It could be a job issue. It could be a health issue, a school issue.

Your staff will probably end up doing most of the work in terms of the paperwork and all that, but if they hear from your voice, "Hi, Peter, my name is Ali Duale. I'm your MLA. I heard you called today on this issue. You can be assured that we're going to take this case very seriously. My staff and I will do everything we can to help you get this issue resolved." - if they hear that from you personally, it goes a long way in helping that individual feel like, good, my government representative is actually going to work for me and actually do this.

If it's all done by email, if it's all done by text and everything else, it's not the same, trust me. It is simply not the same. A lot of people, especially younger people, like to communicate through TikTok or text or whatever, but trust me, the best thing you can do is just phone them.

Here's a little tip for you. I did this in 1997 before we had all this technology. I would rip a page out of a phone book in my area, especially when I represented the Musquodoboit Valley, Larry. I used to call people from Ottawa to Upper Musquodoboit or to all the other communities along the middle, and I'd call them out of the blue. I'd say, "Mr. Harrison, this is Peter Stoffer calling from Ottawa. How are you doing? We're discussing a piece of legislation here. I'd like your view on it." Just out of the blue, Ali. If you do that four or five times a day in your constituency, not only will it help your re-election chances, but what it says to your constituents is that you're not like every other politician - you're actually different. You actually care and will work for the people of your riding. That's what they want to hear. That's what they want to see.

I would encourage you to tell the staff that you have that every single call that comes into your office, you're going to call them back. I made it a rule in my office that every single email from my constituency that came into our office, they got a personal phone call back from me within 48 hours. That was a rule we did, and I would encourage

each and every one of you to set up that rule and call them back. If you can, go and visit that person as well. If you do that, sir, it will go a long way in helping those people, regardless of where they're from and what they do. It will go a long way. It will break the stigma that politicians have.

I don't know if any of you have done this yet, but if you go to a school and you talk about political science, go to a Grade 12 school and tell them to close their eyes and ask them one question. Keep all their eyes closed and ask, "If I say the word politician to you, what's the first thing that comes to your mind?" I guarantee that 99 per cent of them will say something negative if they're being honest: suits, too much money, taxes, they don't care, in it for themselves, et cetera.

Wouldn't it be nice one day if you went to the school and 99 per cent of them said, "Hard-working people who really care about us, and I'm really glad that they got elected." You won't hear that very often. We need all of us collectively to change the parameter, the discussion and the situation on how politicians are viewed. The best way to do that is to talk to them one-on-one consistently in every day of your career, and you will have not only a very fulfilling career but a very worthwhile one as well.

Sorry, that's my little advertisement for politicians. I just respect so much of what all of you do. Mr. Chair, if I may say. I respect so much every single person who puts their name on a ballot, whether they're successful or not. I'm proud of each and every one of them, regardless of party or your points of view. If you put your name forward, I think that's wonderful, because that's what democracy is all about. It's getting good people from different backgrounds working together for the betterment of their society. Each and every one of you deserves my round of applause, and Sandra's. Thank you very much for all that you do as well.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. That means a lot. MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: My question is: What are some of the most common barriers faced by veterans that would lead them to engage in your services?

PETER STOFFER: The number one thing is understanding the system: How does the system actually work? Even though when they were leaving the service, they were provided with all the documentation, files after binder after binder - usually now it's on a disk, for example - most of them don't read it. They're either leaving the service because of a medical reason or they're leaving it because of natural retirement. They don't bother reading all the intricate little notes and details that they have. To be very frank with you, the transition period between actively serving and retirement - even though it's getting better, it's nowhere near where it should be.

I think transition should have family members - not as optional, but mandatory - be there with you when you leave. Many times, the spouse will be at home, the veteran will

take all this information, and they won't ask the right questions. They won't even read half the stuff either. They're just so anxious to get out or they're ill. They just want to get the help they need and they don't bother reading all the details. Years later, they come up, they apply for a benefit. Now what do you do?

If they contact us, we will walk them through the system on how to approach it. If they're looking for medical help, we'll advise them to contact their MLA. We'll look up the numbers and we'll give it to them. In many ways, we'll contact them. If they need help filling out the forms, they can go to any local Legion - you don't have to be a member - and a service officer will assist you in filling out those forms as well. The 1-866-522-2122 number, which is the DVA number - you can call that as well.

I always tell them, and this is very important, for every single person that they talk to - for example, Nolan, if a veteran's calling you - I always say make sure you write down what that person tells you, because sometimes, Nolan, you'll tell them something, then they'll call us and say he said this, and we call you and say no, that's not what they said at all. It's very important to make sure that the communications are very clear.

When you're talking to somebody in officialdom, we always say write down whom you spoke to, when you spoke, and what they wrote to you, because if you are suffering from PTSD or OSIs, you may completely forget a conversation you had a week down the road, and you have to do it all over again. If you write it down, you'll get the details of what you need. If they do that, it goes a long way in helping as well.

THE CHAIR: On our list coming up, I have MLA Hansen and MLA White. MLA Duale, you still have your hand up. Does that mean you want another question after? I just wanted to confirm as I'm making my list here. I'll just remind everybody to put your hand up either on the Zoom window or try to signal me here with your hand. We'll carry on with our questioning for MLA Hansen right now.

SUZY HANSEN: I had a question about mental health, and it was answered. Then I had a number of other pieces, but just the conversation itself has been so rich. One of the main things that I am really concerned about is housing. In your advisory role, what are you hearing from veterans or people who are calling in about the housing crisis, and how is this affecting veterans when they're calling you?

As well, just another note, I found one of these buttons here in my office, just so you know. It's on my wall of many faces. (Laughter) That's off the topic, but yes.

PETER STOFFER: Well, Suzy - if I may call you Suzy - that was from the 2000 campaign. We never had enough money in 1997 for our own buttons at that time, so thank you for that.

As you know, housing isn't critical just for military and RCMP veterans - it's for everyone in our society. Fortunately, there's a group in Dartmouth that started in

Dartmouth: Deb and Jimmy Lowther, whom I'm sure you're all aware of - Veterans Emergency Transition Services. They set up this plan because they were finding homeless veterans under the bridges. It really is quite unconscionable when you think about it. One minute, a person's wearing a uniform serving their country, the next minute they're homeless. How did that happen?

It happens for a variety of reasons, but if we had a callback system, that wouldn't happen. What they did is they find these individuals, ensure that they're a veteran, and then they work with DVA, municipal authorities and the Salvation Army, whomever, in order to get them emergency location for them to settle and be warm and have something to eat. Then they'll work with that veteran in order to apply for their benefits. Once they start receiving the benefits, then they themselves can go get an apartment or something of that nature.

You're right. Across the country - in Edmonton, there's Valour Place. There's an organization in Halifax called the Society of Atlantic Heroes that have an apartment right now at Killam properties on Spring Garden Road. That apartment is for any military or RCMP veteran in Atlantic Canada who's in town. They're going to get medical help and they need a place to stay, they can apply to stay in that apartment for free. That was part of a group I was with for many years. It's called the Society of Atlantic Heroes.

That apartment is there, and the objective was eventually to have a much larger location for all first responders in Atlantic Canada - a one-stop shop, for example, for service dogs, for mental health, benefit retrieval, for guidance, peer support, et cetera. We just never got to that point in that regard, unfortunately, but the apartment is still there.

In many ways, we need to do a much better job for our military and RCMP veterans when it comes to getting the benefits they have, so they have the actual money to have their own apartment or eventually be able to purchase a place. As you know - and I'm not telling you anything you don't know - we simply don't have enough opportunities out there and accommodations for everybody in our society to have a place to stay. I'm the one who thinks that housing is a right. I know that may not suit everyone's political thinking. I believe that every single Canadian should have a warm, safe, secure place to call home, and we should be able to make it affordable regardless of whether you're a military or RCMP veteran.

Especially for those who serve our country, the least we can do is serve them in their hour of need, and for all first responders as well, to ensure they have decent, proper accommodation that they can go to - to call home.

THE CHAIR: MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: I wonder if you could take a few minutes just to explain the process that veterans have to go through to get a successful disability claim.



PETER STOFFER: Number one, they have to have clear medical evidence on file from their time of service. When they're making a claim, they have to have it all in order with medical notification from their doctors, hopefully specialists as well. For example, say you're claiming for a knee injury or a leg injury of some kind. You put in all the paperwork, you send it in. It gets mailed in. Unfortunately, nine out of 10 of those are denied right off the bat, so you have to appeal.

There's a letter that says you can access the Bureau of Pensions Advocates. One thing I always ask people is to ask themselves this question: Why is it that military veterans are the only group of people in the country where the government will supply you a lawyer in order to fight the department of part of that government in order to get benefits? It doesn't happen in Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. It doesn't happen with CPP. It doesn't happen with WCB. The only group of people in the country that gets supplied a lawyer by your government to fight the government is military veterans.

Having said that, it's still there. The Bureau of Pensions Advocates will assist you in filling out the forms again. You would then appear before a two-member board, and these board members are all appointed by government. I have a problem with some of that, but that's another issue altogether. That board, the two-member panel listen to the lawyer, they listen to you, and then they'll adjudicate that decision. Unfortunately, about seven out of 10 times the decision is no. So from there, you end up going to the VRAB. VRAB is in Charlottetown, and you cannot go to Charlottetown for the hearing; only the lawyer who represents you can go to Charlottetown.

The lawyer will then go to VRAB, they'll have the discussion. Then the Veterans Review and Appeal Board - your final decision - will make a decision, yes or no. When I was an MP, roughly 60 per cent of those decisions were in favour of the veteran at that time, but then you have to ask yourself, if you're approving 60 per cent of the decisions at the final level, why couldn't you have approved them earlier on in the process? That is another question for another day.

If you're denied, you get the letter that says: either provide us new, modern, up-to-date medical information, or a witness testimony. For example, you may not have it on your medical file, but there may have been people around you who saw the incident and can sign an affidavit that says they were there when this situation happened. It doesn't guarantee you success, but it offers more credence to the benefit-of-the-doubt clause.

If you're denied, then you either have to have new medical evidence or testimonial evidence, or you go to the Federal Court to seek judicial clarification on the issue. That's generally the process. It can take anywhere from one to two to five years, or even longer.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. Are there any other questions? I don't see any more hands up. MLA Harrison - you have your hand there.

LARRY HARRISON: First of all, Mr. Stoffer, I appreciate your advice and encouragement. Thank you. You obviously do a great deal of good work. Are there ways in which you promote the services among the veteran community? Does everyone know what takes place?

[3:15 p.m.]

PETER STOFFER: Sir, that's a great question. I'll ask my colleague Sandra to answer that question. She's the one who sends out all the information via social media, et cetera.

SANDRA GOODWIN: We do have a website, as I'm sure you're familiar with. We promote the website through social media. We have a Veterans Legal Assistance Foundation Twitter account. We are building our Facebook presence through Dennis Manuge. Any time that I need to get a message out to the veteran community, I do that through Dennis and through his Facebook account, because he is really the hub of veterans' communications.

We've stayed in touch with many of the veterans whom we were introduced to on the LeaveNoVetBehind.com platform. Peter was also mentioning the other veterans' charities. Peter stays in very close contact with all of them. VETS Canada is one good example.

When the courts were closed down at the beginning of COVID, we found ourselves wanting to do more for veterans and not being able to at the time through the legal services. So we started reaching out more to the other veterans' organizations then and, indeed, made some contributions to them. When we received the Toth funding, we sent out a news release on Canada Newswire and pushed that out through email to all of our contacts at all of the veterans' organizations to push it out to their networks as well.

Aside from that, it's as much word of mouth as we can through the Legion representatives, through the other veterans' charities. It's really a constant effort, but we are gaining some traction.

PETER STOFFER: Larry, if I may piggyback on that, I'll give you two examples. There was a gentleman in Guelph, Ontario, who was having difficulty with renovations to his bathroom. DVA was saying to him, well, we don't believe you need this type of bathroom - even though his occupational therapist said he did. DVA was arguing over the cost of an additional \$5,000 for it and it was going to take quite a while for them to either say yes or no finally.

I contacted a group there called Renos for Heroes, which is a charitable group in Ontario. They went in and did the bathroom in a weekend, and it was done. Didn't have to

deal with the government or DVA after that. It was done. Those are the types of connections and communications that we have in order to assist veterans.

There is a veteran in Victoria whom I got off the phone with earlier this morning. He called me a month ago about his father, a 101-year-old RCMP veteran in Victoria who is having great difficulties. He understood something called a power of attorney, but he didn't know what it was. So I explained to him what a power of attorney was and how to go about getting it, about doing it, contacting the lawyer and all this other stuff. He called me today and said he now has power of attorney over his father's affairs and is able to assist his father in dealing with the various provincial representatives who are there and others in order to get his father help.

It's those types of things that we do. We're known out there. We're not as well known as we probably would like. I think we do six or seven new veterans' cases a week in terms of helping them. We probably are working more toward assisting their legal funding down the road, but that comes from lawyers themselves.

We're very appreciative of the information that folks like you have given out there as well. We're here to help any veteran and RCMP member who's out there - and for that matter, any first responder who needs guidance as well. We'll basically send them to you, but we'll tell them how to talk to you when they can.

Thanks, Larry. I appreciate it.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you very much.

PETER STOFFER: I love the beautiful Musquodoboit Valley.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Mr. Stoffer, you mentioned that about 60 per cent are successful after that lengthy process that you described. Thank you very much. Of the 40 per cent roughly - you're guessing those numbers today - can you tell us what the most common issues are that they're actually denied for, that are not recognized by the federal government, and what we as a Province can do to help assist in that?

PETER STOFFER: I would say the number one issue is physical injuries, and, of course, now more and more mental injuries as well. It's proving that someone suffered this injury, or the start of the injury happened because of military service or because of RCMP service. That's some of the greatest difficulty. There's a clause there called the benefit of the doubt, and we argue - legal people argue - over this back and forth as well: What does it actually mean? They'll tell you that we will look for anything in order to get the veteran the benefit, but I'll be very honest with you - that simply doesn't happen.

That system is set up to deny people. Many people in the veteran community believe that DVA has two policies. One is the no-go policy - that if they say no long enough, you'll go away. The other is the 3D policy. If you delay, they deny, and if you die, well that's unfortunate - it's just too bad, you know. They'll deny they have this, but I've spoken with people within the DVA community, and also with their unions and other people who are managers of the system, and they say it's alive and well. We just don't televise it, or don't tell anybody about it.

What needs to happen in the system itself is trust the system. It's funny: We trust these men and women with millions of dollars of equipment overseas, dealing with lives and police vehicles. We trust them with the lives of our citizenry, in many ways, yet we don't trust them when they make an application for a hearing aid or an application for a physical injury or a mental injury. We put them through this Gordian knot of bureaucracy. What happened to the trust then? When a woman comes forward and says she was sexually assaulted in the RCMP and it's documented, that should be it.

There was a case years ago. Mr. Franklin in Edmonton, missing both his legs, was receiving a letter from DVA reviewing his application for benefits. Are you still disabled? Trust me, it happened. It was well recorded. It was all over the news. It behooves me to have to listen to veterans talk about the problems they have within the system because they simply don't trust the veteran. They think the veteran is trying to get something that they don't deserve. As I said earlier, less than two per cent of those people are trying to cheat the system. I can guarantee you, give me two minutes with any veteran or RCMP member and I'll tell you whether they're faking it or not. It's not that difficult to figure it out.

If we can speed up the application process, we could save an awful lot of time. I'm not saying anything out of school. This is exactly what veterans' ombudsmen have been saying and defence ombudsmen have been saying for many years. Speed up the system and get them the benefit that they require. Also, make sure that the entire medical file they have is clear for them to fully understand. It's critical that all of them have this documented evidence.

There's a doctor here in Halifax, Dr. Heather MacKinnon, whom many may know. She was a fighting surgeon in the military. Years ago, she was helping a veteran, and she recorded her medical professional opinion on this particular veteran. The letter came back from DVA, which had dealt with many of her letters, saying in this case they simply didn't believe the doctor was telling the truth.

Why would Heather MacKinnon, or any professional, put their name to a letter and say something that was false? They know that would be the end of their career. I have not yet met a doctor or a psychiatrist, or anyone of that nature, who'd falsify documents to help their patient. I have not come across that. Not saying it couldn't happen, but it's never happened in my career as an MP, and my years of service afterwards helping veterans.

We need to put trust back into the system. We need to put honesty back into the system. We need to understand that these veterans aren't lying. They don't like to come forward looking for help, but they feel they have no other choice but to try to get a benefit in order to help them and their families. Thank you. Sorry, I need to rant a bit sometimes when I hear that. I thank you, John, for listening, and others.

THE CHAIR: Do I see any more hands for any more questions? MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Nova Scotians have one of the largest contingents of enlisted members per capita. How does that affect the number of cases in the province?

PETER STOFFER: In terms of benefits that they applied for? It would be whatever the ratio is. I believe at one time in the military, it was fair to say that 25 per cent of the men and women who served in the military were from Atlantic Canada. You can just extrapolate from that to say that 25 per cent of applicants for benefits would have been from Atlantic Canada as well.

I will tell you this, though. When you call the 1-866-522-2122 number, you may get someone from Kirkland, Ontario, you may get them from B.C., you may get them from Quebec. If you're fortunate enough to get somebody from Atlantic Canada, you've got half the battle beaten right there. I'm not from here, by the way, folks. I was born in Holland, raised in Vancouver and Yukon - but there's something about Atlantic Canadians that they just give you that extra minute of time to be able to listen to you.

Even though they have parameters and rules they have to follow, there's something about reaching that Atlantic Canadian with their Cape Breton voice, or someone from the south shore, or someone from somewhere with that accent that makes you feel better already. I know that when I myself call 311 or someone else of that nature, if they're from Atlantic Canada, for some reason I just feel better. I would say it's roughly the same percentage of those that have been listed in that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer. I would just remind everybody we, by my time here, I think we have about 14 minutes available for questions if we have enough questions to fill the time. MLA Jessome, you're up next.

BEN JESSOME: I'd just like to clarify whether or not your organization would assist the spouses or the partners of enlisted or formerly enlisted veterans. I'd just like to get a sense of whether or not your organization provides that type of support to, perhaps, the surviving member of the family.

PETER STOFFER: Yes. If you take, for example, the situation of Dawn Collins. Dawn Collins was a case I worked on as a Member of Parliament. We were not successful in getting it resolved. For six years after, I continued to work with her in dealing with this situation, getting the documents, going back, never giving up. The one thing I tell every veteran that calls me is to never, ever give up - do not stop. Many veterans will apply,

they'll be denied, and they just stop. That's it. They go away. They can't deal with it anymore.

Dawn Collins was similar. She was a widow of a veteran who was chemically injured onboard a vessel and had all the documentation. In fact, other countries recognized it and provided benefits to their spouses. They denied her and denied her until just prior to Christmas, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board offered something called a Compassionate Award. The reason they do that, well, one, it's nice. She received a fair chunk of change for that. I'm not able to disclose how much she received, but it was a fairly healthy amount. They awarded it on a compassionate basis so as not to set a precedent. If any other spouses, husband, went through the same thing, they would have to apply and go all the way through - the same type of thing.

In answer, we will help all spouses and family members, children of veterans and RCMP members. If they want to know why their mom or dad is not the mom or dad they were before they signed up - they're having difficulty - we will speak to them and offer to get them the help they need. We don't fill out the forms, for example. We just advise them where to go to get it done. We always give them our number so they can call us back, just as a follow-through and a follow-up to see how they're doing. The answer to your question is yes.

THE CHAIR: MLA White. Do you have a question?

JOHN WHITE: I didn't want to take up all the time, so I was waiting back. My question is, in Manuge versus Her Majesty, how many Nova Scotian veterans received the awards from this case? Have they all received the benefits, and what about the veterans who passed away before the case was awarded? Are you able to offer any information on that, Peter?

PETER STOFFER: I'll let Sandra answer that one, sir. Thank you.

SANDRA GOODWIN: The total class was over 8,000. I think it was close to 10,000 veterans by the time . . .

PETER STOFFER: RCMP.

SANDRA GOODWIN: And RCMP. Again, it was probably that 25 per cent number that were Nova Scotian. What was the second part of your question?

JOHN WHITE: Second part is: Have they all received their benefits? Another part is: What about the veterans who have passed away before that was awarded?

SANDRA GOODWIN: Sadly, the veterans who passed - so for example in the Toth class action, the reason that we received \$1 million of funding last year is because of

veterans who had passed on. That's a testament to the problem with the delay. They call it residue from the award. Then the Federal Court mandates that that residue funding must be distributed to veterans' charities. It does eventually reach the veteran community through organizations like ours, but unfortunately, it's part of the residue of the award.

PETER STOFFER: Some of you may be thinking: How do we do with our money? Our money is invested from a private firm here in Nova Scotia. It's the interest from that funding that we use to pay the very small administrative fees we have. For all the court cases and legal actions that we have after that, it's the interest from that money that helps us to assist those veterans in this regard. We anticipate we're able to help many veterans as they come forward and come to us with their various issues and that.

We also wanted to let all of you folks know that if you have any veterans or RCMP members out there who are looking at legal action of any kind, where it suits our criteria, by all means have them contact us. We'd be very happy to speak to them and their legal representatives to see where we can assist them in this regard.

SANDRA GOODWIN: I will also just take this opportunity to say that since October of last year - when we have opened it up and did indeed promote through Dennis Manuge and these other veterans' organizations, that we are now providing free advisory services - this man here has been on the phone with veterans probably five or six times a week. Sometimes those conversations can run an hour to two hours sometimes. Quite often they are not related to something that can be provided with legal funding, but by the end of the conversation, Peter has given them advice and talked them down from an often fairly frantic state.

He then follows up with them, gives them some steps, some guidance and some viable things they can do. He then calls them back a couple of weeks later to make sure they're still okay. I'll tell you, I've never felt better about this organization and what we've done since we started offering those additional services.

PETER STOFFER: Thank you, Sandra. The key to it, Mr. White - especially those veterans who are suffering from PTSD or OSI - is they'll repeat themselves over and over again in a conversation. I find it best to allow them to talk - not necessarily to get it out of their system, but to allow them to explain it in the best way they feel they can. It's not necessarily a three- or five-minute conversation. Sometimes it can take well over an hour or two hours of time just to talk to them, hear them out, and allow them to describe their career, their families, where they live, problems they're having, et cetera. It really doesn't matter. Whatever they wish to talk about, I'll listen to them and hear them out and then give them the proper steps on how to do it.

Hopefully, they become successful, and in many cases they have. Some are not. You don't win every case, but it's nice to be able to look after the men and women who served us. The reason I do all of this, and Sandra as well, is I was born in Holland - my parents were liberated by Canada and her allies during World War II. My dad was in a

labour camp that was liberated, we believe, by the South Saskatchewan Regiment. When he asked the Canadian soldiers why they came over to help him, the Canadian soldier said in typical Canadian modesty, "Well, sir, we had a job to do." He gave my dad a cigarette and a chocolate and he moved on. That was the first time in my dad's life anyone had ever called him sir, and that chocolate tasted pretty sweet and my dad loved a cigarette.

In 1956, when they shut down the coal mines of southern Holland over a five-year period, my dad was a miner then. The only answer for thousands of Dutch folks was outmigration. We came to Pier 21, and from there we went directly to Vancouver, where I grew up. It's nice to do a full circle and come back to Nova Scotia, in many ways.

It's the men and women who liberated the Netherlands who are why I do this. I owe them something. They're the ones who served us. Your constituents, your family, your relatives - it's your people who liberated my people, as we say. I thank you for that. There's a headstone in Passchendaele Court that was written by someone and it says: He left his country so you could live in yours. I thought that was pretty cool. Thank you, Canada.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I think we've had a very robust round of questioning. I really do want to thank you on behalf of our committee. Wonderful information, and the passion that you both display is very clear. Mr. Stoffer, as we mentioned earlier, your advocacy is well documented through veterans and Legions all over Nova Scotia and all over Canada. I know I can speak for those in my constituency of Kings West who speak highly of you. Thank you very much.

We'd like to offer you both a chance to offer any closing remarks to our committee before we say goodbye today.

SANDRA GOODWIN: I'd simply say what we've said, that we are trying to get the word out more about what we do. Any of your constituents that you're aware of who could benefit from our help, please send them our way. Help us get the word out.

PETER STOFFER: If I may say, first of all, Mr. Chair, thank you, and to the clerk of the committee and every single one of you for your service to our Province and to our people of Nova Scotia as well.

If there are two things I can leave you with to assist veterans - your constituents, in many ways - if you can stress upon your colleagues and the federal Department of Veterans Affairs and your Members of Parliament to speed up the time it takes to get a benefit awarded - or at least adjudicated - you will have gone a long way in helping the men and women who serve.

Whether they're denied at the end or not, as long as it's done in a quick and proper fashion, as soon as humanly possible, it will go a long way. If you could ever make that



recommendation to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Lawrence MacAulay, it would go a long way in helping our men and women in the services.

The second thing is the men and women who work in the Department of Veterans Affairs, a lot of them are maligned in many ways - reach out to them and thank them for the job that they do. These public servants do an unbelievable job looking after our men and women who serve. Unfortunately, the system is set up where they wish to do more, but they can't because their hands are tied by the legislation, the regulations and the rules in place. If we could allow the frontline people to make the decisions for benefits based on peer-reviewed medical evidence, that would not only solve the timing issue but allow the frontline people to know that they've made a difference in the lives of the men and women who've served.

If you can do those two things - make those recommendations and reach out to the men and women who serve, or even yourselves, Mr. Chair and your group - stop by the Halifax office, walk in, and say hello to these fine folks. Give them a hug, a pat on the back - obviously not with COVID. Just tell them what a great job they do. Invite them in as well. You'll go a long way in showing them that their service is valuable. If we could allow them more tools in the toolbox to be able to assist the men and women who've served us, it would go a long way.

I can't thank you enough for this opportunity. I truly appreciate it. I also wish to say, on behalf of Sandra and our board, thank you so much. If each and any one of you, or any of your colleagues in the Legislature, at any time would like any kind of conversation or advice on anything of this nature at all, please do not hesitate to give us a call. We would be happy to assist you in any way that we can.

Thank you so much. As they say in the Legion, never regret getting older - it's a privilege denied to so many.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr. Stoffer and Ms. Goodwin. Thank you for appearing today. We're ready to move on to our committee business.

On our agenda, we'll move on to committee business. I will start by giving an update on our meeting of January 18<sup>th</sup>. By your direction, we sent a letter on January 26<sup>th</sup> to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Laurence McCauley, requesting information. At this point, we still have not received any information, but just wanted to give an update that a letter was sent out on behalf of our committee requesting information in a motion put forward by MLA Jessome in the last meeting.

Our meeting for March, the organization that we'll be hearing from is called Seamless Canada. We've had a request from them for their witness to appear virtually. The witnesses are located in Ottawa, and they would prefer for the witnesses to attend virtually. Witness travel expenses such as hotel and meals can be reimbursed. However, it's unclear if airfare would be covered, and, if it's requested by the witness, we could revisit the issue.

Colonel Boucher, who is the main witness, is still waiting for an approval from the federal minister to appear before the committee. There isn't any anticipation of him not being approved, but approval is required.

Legislative TV can provide services for virtual or in-person meetings, given enough notice. They're not really looking to offer a hybrid model at this point because of the extra work and equipment needed, but if it's possible to meet in the Chamber with distancing protocols, we would do that. We'd have a maximum of 15 people in the room which would mean 4 witnesses at most, and all legislative and caucus staff would have to sit outside in the Chamber.

Our witness is requesting, potentially, to meet in a hybrid model with them being in Ottawa. I just wanted to put that out there as information and see if there's any discussion on that. MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I guess I should have been more explicit. I just expected that this organization would meet with us virtually, given their proximity to our Legislature. The content will fall directly into the interests of this committee. That's one of the beauties of having a virtual capacity, as we can connect with people with like interests even though they're not right here in Nova Scotia. I guess I'll wait to hear what the other committee members have to say.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I support them being able to participate virtually. I think it's really important for us to keep considering how we can make participation in these committees and other things as accessible as possible. I also think, in terms of the climate cost and climate justice of flying people back and forth, we really need to use this opportunity to do business differently.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I agree. I think we also have to capture this opportunity while we have it. This is a good time in the sense that we've been able to do this virtually and have capability in this sense. I'm fine with having a virtual meeting with this particular presenter, if everyone is fine with it as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young, I think you had your hand up.

NOLAN YOUNG: Yes. A couple things to break down. Just for clarity, this witness would like to meet virtually. A hybrid option would still be possible?

THE CHAIR: That's correct. Did you have anything else?

[3:45 p.m.]

NOLAN YOUNG: No, I was just going to ask, do you need a motion, or is everyone in agreement that hybrid is fine with that?

THE CHAIR: Does anyone want to put a motion out regarding that? Did anyone have a motion about that? MLA Young, you finish your thought.

NOLAN YOUNG: What I'm going to ask here - it's two parts, okay? I would like to make a motion, and I'll read it out.

As Dr. Strang has released the province's reopening plan this week, and it's allowing increased gathering limits beginning Monday, on Valentine's Day, the 14<sup>th</sup>. Based on Dr. Strang's guidance and following Public Health protocols, I'm hoping it appears safe and appropriate to have the Veterans Affairs Committee resume meeting in person - and with that said, still allow for the hybrid option for this witness.

I would like to move that the Veterans Affairs Committee resume in-person meetings beginning with the meeting scheduled March 22<sup>nd</sup>, but allowing for a hybrid option for a witness if possible.

THE CHAIR: We have a motion on the table. Any discussion regarding that? MLA Jessome, I think you might have had your hand up first, I'm not sure.

BEN JESSOME: I guess I just would encourage simplicity here, if there's capacity to. It's more onerous to set up the hybrid option. I should see it fit and satisfactory at least with me to do it simply and do a virtual meeting. We are interested in going back to the Committee Room at some point. I'm happy to comply, but in this situation, I don't have a problem having another virtual meeting and maybe the next one we go to in-person. Simplicity works best for me, if my two cents is worth something.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart, did you have your hand up?

TOM TAGGART: I did, but the question I had in this hybrid model is: Will it be just the witnesses who are going to be virtual? Is that correct?

THE CHAIR: That's correct. Again, we're being told that they can accommodate the committee to meet in person in the Chamber with distancing protocols, to a maximum of 15 people in the room. That would mean four witnesses at most, and all legislative and caucus staff would have to sit outside the Chamber. That's the word from Legislative TV and the technical part of it.

Any more comments or discussion on the actual motion put forward by MLA Young? MLA Young, did you have another comment?

NOLAN YOUNG: I just want to make sure everyone understands what I'm asking so I can clarify that one more time. We're aligning with other committees that are going to be going back to meeting in person. My motion is that we can meet in person and allow for a hybrid option for this witness. It could be two separate motions if we need, but I think that's clear.

THE CHAIR: I'll go to our counsel just to confirm. Do we need two motions for that, Gordon, or can it be put in one motion?

GORDON HEBB: It can be in one motion.

THE CHAIR: Without any further discussion or any hands, I guess we do have a motion on the table.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Our next meeting will be if the House is not sitting. Is it my recollection that we had decided as a committee we would not meet while the Legislature is on? I'm getting a nod from Judy, our clerk. I think what we'll find is we made our decision that we wouldn't meet while the House is sitting. So, if the House is sitting, the meeting scheduled for March 22<sup>nd</sup>, from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. would be rescheduled - again, to not conflict with another committee meeting in the afternoon that day. The topic would be Seamless Canada. That would be the next meeting. MLA Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Since we're coordinating with Ottawa, does the committee have an interest in bumping that meeting to the beginning of the month? We do have at least 30 days from tomorrow - that's the notice requirement to go back to the House. We do have the first couple weeks in March to schedule this meeting if we're coordinating with Ottawa. That does, perhaps, add a layer of consideration. I would suggest that we have an opportunity to facilitate that meeting - either the first, second, or even third week of March.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I actually like that idea. I think we need to take every opportunity we can to really understand the challenges that the veterans face and educate ourselves on those issues, see what we can do to help. I'm more than happy to, if that's what it takes to ensure that we have our March meeting, I like that idea. Those are my thoughts.

THE CHAIR: I don't have my calendar in front of me to see what those dates could be. I'll go to our clerk, Judy.

JUDY KAVANAGH: I've just been handed a note though, reminding us that the witness does not yet have approval from his minister to appear. We don't know whether that will be here in time for early March.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, that's a good point. MLA Lachance, did you have a question? Did I miss your hand?

LISA LACHANCE: I was just going to provide feedback to the discussion of moving the meeting, that the public school March Break is the week of March 14<sup>th</sup>. I believe that the Legislature is on vacation at that point, or on hiatus.

BEN JESSOME: I don't have any kids yet, so I missed that memo.

SUZY HANSEN: I've got all kinds. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: All good, valid points. I guess I can leave it with the committee, to take your direction on this. I don't know if we can make any decision on that other than stick with the date that we've already put out there, because we haven't heard from the witness. Am I misreading that, MLA Jessome? Does anybody else want to provide feedback on that?

BEN JESSOME: The alternative, Mr. Chair, is that if we have someone else on our list that we can schedule, and bump Seamless Canada intentionally a month or so, then that's an option, too, to ensure that we do get a March meeting.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I was just going to suggest that we leave this to the Chair and the clerk, as they tend to deal with scheduling and stuff with witnesses in general. If we could leave it with them and if we were able to schedule a witness into the meeting, we meet, and if there are conflicts with March Break and the Legislature - it's either one or the other. I'd prefer to leave it with the Chair and the clerk to see if it's possible with scheduling.

THE CHAIR: I'm willing to take that advice and that direction if the committee's good with that. The clerk and I can confer on that, and then we'll see the scheduling pieces of it and go from there, I guess. Does that satisfy the committee? MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I just want to make sure I fully understand. We are giving the clerk and the Chair the authority to investigate the possibilities of rescheduling the meeting or the witnesses, to try to ensure that we have a meeting in March. Is that correct? We as committee are giving that authority?

THE CHAIR: I just want to understand what Mr. Taggart is saying. You're giving us the authority to pick the topic and the witnesses?

TOM TAGGART: That's what I want to know, yes.

THE CHAIR: I just want that clarification myself.

BEN JESSOME: From the list of approved topics.

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Gordon, you had a comment? What was that?

GORDON HEBB: I believe he said, "and the date."

THE CHAIR: Our clerk, Ms. Kavanagh - did you have a comment there?

JUDY KAVANAGH: I was just going to get clarification on this. The third Tuesday of March is out because it's March Break. The committee already made that decision in a previous meeting. So what you're asking is, if it's possible to schedule a witness for, say, the first or second Tuesday of the month - bearing in mind that there are other committees meeting on the first and second Tuesday of the month - but we could do one morning and one afternoon.

If the clerk can schedule a witness for either of those two Tuesdays, then the committee would be willing to meet on those days to have a March meeting, on the assumption that the House may be sitting by the end of the month. Assuming the House isn't sitting at the end of the month, would you still want to have that March 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting?

THE CHAIR: If the House is not sitting?

JUDY KAVANAGH: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I think that was the date we had picked at the last meeting.

JUDY KAVANAGH: The committee usually meets on the third Tuesday of the month, so that would be, what, the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup>? Because it's March Break, the committee made the decision to meet later on in the month, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we had already previously decided that. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I just want to say, I'm not familiar with the timelines, certainly, in how long the Legislature will sit in the Spring. I expect it to sit longer than we did in the Fall because it's a budget sitting. If we don't get it in March, we're going to miss April too. I don't think that we should take that chance.

Whatever we do on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, I don't have a huge opinion on it, but I do believe that we need to make every effort to have a meeting in the first two weeks - within the first two Tuesdays in March. I'd be prepared to make that motion.

THE CHAIR: If there's a motion to be put forward, do you want to make that motion, MLA Taggart? We're still assuming that maybe Seamless Canada might be the ones able to appear on the second Tuesday of the month or something. We can't just assume that they're not going to be able to do it, but I'll leave it to you to determine what the motion might be, and then we can go forward on that.

TOM TAGGART: I kind of want to hear from the others, but I want to get a motion on the floor at least for discussion, to see where everybody else sits on that. I really don't want to go until sometime in May - you know what I mean?

THE CHAIR: We're at two minutes beforehand here now. Are we going to solve this issue before 3 o'clock? Do we want to vote for an extension? What do we want to do?

It seems like we had direction from this committee in the last meeting to pick the date we picked and to pursue our witness who we had then. I appreciate the fact that we want to try to get an extra meeting in. MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: In the last meeting, we shifted the dates around then as well. Obviously, the clerk would know other committees that we're all sitting on, so I'm pretty sure that between the two of you, it may be something that can come together. Then we can say yea or nay or have that discussion via email. I don't know if that's something everybody wants to do. Just a thought.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: To be quite honest, this date has already made. The committee's being given this task. I'm sure a lot of effort has been made. Let's just take it, and if that works, wonderful. If it doesn't, we have no control in life. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: If I have the direction from the committee for the clerk and myself to coordinate the date and confirm the witness off the approved topic list, I guess that's probably the way we'll proceed. Do we feel good with that?

That being said, I think that's the way we'll move forward on that. If there is no other business, we'll call for an adjournment. Thank you, everyone, for your participation this afternoon. We'll look forward to speaking soon.

[The meeting adjourned at 4:00 p.m.]